


Plus

Only 16 of 122 Virginia hospitals are equipped for sexual assault forensic exams. Lawmakers aim to change that.

 Frank Green / By FRANK GREEN Richmond Times-Dispatch

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Legislation to help sexual assault survivors get improved access to forensic examinations and other services is making its way through the General Assembly this year.

A shortage of qualified nurses and facilities in Virginia sometimes means traumatized assault victims must travel from hospital to hospital, or for hours and hundreds of miles to have evidence of the attack properly collected for authorities.

Rebecca Courtright, a rape survivor, on Wednesday urged the Senate Judiciary Committee to advance a bill sponsored by Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Bath — one of two pending bills that would create a Virginia Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Coordination Program within the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The Richmond Times-Dispatch typically doesn't name survivors of sexual assault unless, like Courtright, they identify themselves publicly.

"I want you to imagine being brave enough to come forward and report this and they aren't able to collect the evidence ... you need to support this," she said.

Advocates say the difficulty victims sometimes encounter in having evidence properly collected helps explain why less than half of all sexual assaults are reported. The problem, they say, is a national one.

A report last year by the Joint Commission on Health Care found that of the nearly 100,000 registered nurses in Virginia, fewer than 200 are credentialed forensic nurses.

Citing the report, Camille Cooper, with the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, told the Senate Justice Committee that of the 122 hospitals in the state, just 16 provide the sexual assault forensic examinations that are necessary to collect crucial evidence.

A bill introduced by state Del. Karrie Delaney, D-Fairfax, would require all hospitals to provide treatment or transfer services under a plan to be approved by the Virginia Department of Health.

Her bill would also set requirements for those providing services to pediatric sexual assault survivors; require the Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund to pay the costs of services to survivors; and create a Task Force on Services for Survivors of Sexual Assault to help in the development of services.

Delaney's office said that in response to the Joint Commission on Health Care's study last year, Gov. Ralph Northam's budget proposal allocates \$6 million to cover anticipated costs for services to sexual assault survivors from the victim compensation fund.

Advocates say the shortage of forensic nurse examiners is not for lack of interest from nurses — it's a shortage of available training and clinical programs that can take a year or more for a nurse to gain credentials.

And once trained, it is a challenge to keep forensic nurses because the work is difficult and emotionally taxing.

Deeds' bill, and an identical one carried by Del. Mike Mullin, D-Newport News, that is making its way through the House of Delegates, would establish the Virginia Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner Coordination Program and would require a new state position.

The coordinator would create a statewide sexual assault forensic nurse examiner training program in partnership with the attorney general's office, the Virginia Department of Health, the Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association, the Virginia Victim Compensation Fund, the International Association of Forensic Nurses, and the secretary of health and human services.

Among other responsibilities, the coordinator would develop and improve examiner programs, help develop hospital procedures and guidelines for treating sexual assault survivors, and provide technical assistance for existing and developing sexual assault forensic examiner programs, including local sexual assault forensic examiner training programs.

Also under the bill, a statewide list would be created to identify available sexual assault forensic examiners, sexual assault nurse examiners, sexual assault forensic nurse examiners, and pediatric sexual assault nurse examiners.

The list — to be distributed to emergency medical services, police and other agencies — would include the location of each examiner, their duty hours and the location of available local sexual assault forensic examiner training programs.

Deeds' and Mullin's bills, which would require an additional \$150,000 in funding, have been sent to the Senate Finance and House Appropriations committees.